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ABSTRACT

A re-analysis of data from a previous study was undertaken to determine if student essays catagorized as dealing with group-phenomenon events differed in quality and syntactic complexity from essays categorized as dealing with individually experienced events. The essays of 44 college freshmen in basic writing classes were catagorized as dealing either with incidents experienced by several students (intensification) or with an incident experienced only by the individual student (initiation). Raters scored the essays for topic-type, quality, and syntactic complexity. Results revealed that the students produced 10 intensification and 33 initiation essays, with the intensification essays receiving significantly lower quality scores than the initiation essays. The intensification papers, however, contained more words per clause than the initiation papers. The findings suggest that the intensification topic-type resulted in "syntactic confusion" rather than syntactic maturity. (Excepts from both types of essays are included in the paper.) (FL)

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Initiation Versus Intensification: The Effect of Topic-Type on the Writing Performance of Basic Writers

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RUNNING HEAD: Topic-Type and Basic Writers

CS 209 446

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Abstract

A re-analysis of data from a previous study (Reed & Sherman, 1984) was performed to determine if essays categorized as dealing with group-phenomenon events differed in quality and syntactic complexity from essays categorized as dealing with individually experienced events. The essays of 44 college freshman writers assigned to basic writing classes were categorized as dealing either with group-phenomenon topics (intensification) or individually experienced topics (initiation). It was found that the essays categorized as intensification essays received statistically significant lower quality scores ($p = .012$) than essays categorized as initiation. The intensification essays, however, contained more words per clause than the initiation essays ($p = .06$). The negative relationship between quality and words per clause might indicate that the intensification topic-type resulted in "syntactic confusion," rather than "syntactic maturity," the usual interpretation of relative higher measures of syntactic complexity. Excerpts from essays of both topic-types are presented to illustrate possible reasons for the lower quality of intensification essays.

One of the most common guidelines given to writing instructors is to construct topics that are general in nature so that writers can easily apply topic-related knowledge to the personal experiences stored in their permanent memory (Langer, 1984; Strickland, 1963). In college freshman writing courses, particularly basic writing courses, instructors tend to avoid knowledge-specific topics for many of the initial essays and focus instead on personal narrative assignments. Even though general topics, such as "A person I'll never forget," " The worst job I ever had," and "Give a chronological account of an event that had an emotional impact on you," allow the writer to adapt the topic to his or her own knowledge, such topics may be too general and thus create other problems.

Because what writers store in permanent memory depends on the personal experiences they have (Flower & Hayes, 1984), the treatment of the topics may easily vary across writers. This treatment may be based on individually experienced events or group-phenomenon events. An individually experienced event, for example, might involve the death of a loved one or a person's first serious relationship. A group-phenomenon event might involve a championship football game. According to the field of anthropology, such distinctions are known as <u>intensification</u> (group-phenomenon events) and

initiation or rite of passage (individually experienced events) (Fuchs, 1969). One concern that arises, then, is whether topic-type is a factor in a student's success at writing on a topic that may lead to either intensification-or initiation-type essays. Raised after a previous study conducted by Reed and Sherman (1984) and based on an observation of the essays, this concern is the focus of the re-analysis of the data from that study. The purpose of this study was to determine if topic-type (group versus individual) affected the syntactic complexity and quality of the final written product. Thus, the research questions were 1) what is the effect of topic-type (intensification or initiation) on syntactic complexity? and 2) what is the effect of topic-type on quality of writing?

Design of the Study

Participants

In the Reed and Sherman study (1984), the 44 college freshman basic writers made up four groups which were randomly assigned to the experimental treatments. Basic writers, rather than honors writers, were chosen for these re-analyses because we assumed that the difficulty involved in writing on group-phenomenon events versus an individually experienced event, if indeed a factor, would be more evident among basic writers than among honors writers by impeding

their grammatical and syntactic performance.

Methods

In the Reed and Sherman study (1984), all groups were given the same topic (Give a chronological account of an event that has had an emotional impact on you") and audience (trusted adult). All groups were given 15 minutes to prewrite, 25 minutes to write the essay, and 10 minutes to rewrite or revise the essay (for further detail, refer to the study). Because it was assumed that topic type would be evenly distributed across experimental conditions, the four treatments in the original study were collapsed and topic-type was the only independent variable. It was later determined that this assumption proved true: e.g., of the 10 essays assigned to intensification, three were from condition one, three from condition two, two from condition three, and two from condition four.

Topic-Type Classification

Intensification Versus Initiation. In this study, intensification referred to incidents which several people had experienced. The writers attempted to take into account the intensity of their own feelings about and reactions to the event as well as others' feelings and reactions to the event. Initiation, on the other hand, referred to an individual's experience of an event, an incident which

served as a rite of initiation. The writer dealt with how this experience had had some impact on him and how some personal growth had come out of it. Using these definitions, the researchers established criteria to determine whether an essay was on a topic of intensification or initiation.

Intensification Criteria. An essay was considered to be one of intensification if it contained the following features: 1) it focused on an event that involved people other than the writer with these other people playing major roles, not simply in importance but also in written space allocated by the writer; and 2) the writer tried to present not only his own feelings towards or reactions to the event but also those of significant others in the narrative.

Initiation Criteria. If an essay contained the features explained below, then it was classified as an initiation essay: 1) it focused on an event that generally involved one person (or, if more than one person, they were inconsequential and were necessary just to complete the situation); and 2) the writer presented only his feelings and reactions to the event.

Analysis of the Data

The two researchers read each essay independently of each other and classified each essay either as intensification, initiation, or undecided. Of the 44 essays, both researchers classified 10 essays as intensification, 33 as initiation, and none undecided. For one essay, however,

one classified it as intensification, and the other classified it as initiation. This essay was eliminated from the analysis, and thus, the inter-rater agreement was 0.97.

Four one-way analyses of variance were performed with topic-type (intensification or initiation) as the independent variable. Quality scores (Cooper & Odell, 1977) and three measures of syntactic complexity (words per T-unit, words per clause, and clauses per T-unit; Hunt, 1970) were singly dependent measures in the ANOVAs.

The essay raters gave an essay a score of four if the writer has given some thought to the topic and wrote what was really thought; discussed each main point long enough to show clearly what was meant; supported each main point with examples or details; and gave the reader some reason for believing it. The points were clearly related to the topic and to the main idea or impression the writer was trying to convey. No necessary points were overlooked, and there was no padding. A score of three was given to an essay if, for the most part, the writer had thought out the topic and was somewhat convincing. Most of the main points were dealt with in some depth and were supported with examples and reasoning. The reader was able to follow the logic and exposition, and the main ideas in the essay seldom moved from the topic or main points. Few main points were overlooked, and there were few sentences that did not seem to be necessary. A score of two was given if the paper gave the impression that the writer did not really believe what he was writing or did not

fully understand what it meant. The writer tried to guess what would please the reader and wrote what he thought would satisfy the assignment. The writer did not explain the points very clearly or did not make them come alive to the reader. The writer wrote what he thought might sound good, rather than what he believed or knew. A score of one was given an essay if it was hard to tell what points the writer was trying to make or else the points were so silly that, if the writer had only stopped to think, he would have realized that they made no sense. The writer was only trying to get something down on paper, not explaining most of the points; he generally asserted the points and then went on to something else or repeating them in slightly different words (Cooper & Odell, 1977, pp. 7-8).

T-units are independent clauses plus embedded modifiers and related dependent clauses (Hunt, 1970). Based on the Reed and Sherman study (1984), the inter-rater reliability for quality scores was 0.93; for words per T-unit, 0.89; for words per clause, 0.93; and, for clauses per T-unit, 0.91.

Results

There were no statistically significant mean differences on the three measures of syntactic complexity at the a priori level of .05, although for words per clause there was a statistically significant difference at the .06 level (see

Table 1). This relationship, however, was negative. Those essays that received higher quality scores had fewer words per clause. This finding is consistent with other studies (Crowhurst, 1980; Mellon, 1969; Reed, Burton, & Vandett, 1984; Schmeling, 1970) in which there often is not a statistically significant relationship or a positive relationship between quality of writing and syntactic complexity.

Those basic writers who chose to write on group phenomenon events wrote essays that received lower quality scores than those who chose to write on individually experienced events ($F(1,41) = 6.771$, $MSe = 1.059$, $p = .012$; see Table 1). An initial inference is that it is more difficult to recount the feelings and reactions of a group of people than it is to recount those of an individual; thus, the difficulty of the group-topic task may affect the quality of the writing of basic writers.

Discussion

Syntactic Complexity

According to Table 1, writers who wrote essays categorized as intensification produced more words per clause than those writers who wrote essays categorized as initiation. But the quality of the essays produced by those writers who chose intensification topics was significantly lower. One explanation may be that an intensification topic-

type, because of its higher degree of difficulty relative to the topic-type of initiation, resulted in "syntactic confusion" rather than "syntactic maturity."

Quality

Several factors may explain the poorer quality of those essays that were categorized as intensification versus those categorized as initiation. First, as stated earlier, the results of this study suggest that it is more difficult to represent convincingly more than one person in an "essay event," partly because the additional person or people are ones other than the writer. Another factor may be the time and subsequent written space allowed for an essay assignment. When writing on an initiation topic-type, the writer can allot all time and content to present his own emotions, feelings, or beliefs. In contrast, a writer who chooses an intensification topic-type must divide up the time for each person, thus limiting the written treatment of each one. Such division may result in a superficial and unconvincing presentation of the other people. In essence, intensification essays by basic writers tend to lack quality and credibility because the writing is too general and because the writers lack the level of skills required to deal with such topic-types (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Intensification. In the intensification essays, the emotional event was shared by a group of people, each of whom contributed to the event and on whom the event had an

emotional impact. Examples included a heroic, winning, or losing effort of the team. The "team-ness" led to a sharing of the experience and the emotion, a sharing which further intensified the team spirit or togetherness. There was often a momentary closeness, joy, or triumph mentioned or described in these essays.

One reason basic writers had difficulty writing on group-phenomenon events was their lack of skills needed to take into account and present convincingly the feelings and reactions of significant others who were a part of the event. The treatment often appeared to be cryptic and superficial. For example, one basic writer wrote: "This was my last season and my coach knew this and he wanted to see me leave the right way." He continued: "Most of the players on this team were seniors just like me and they wanted the same thing that I wanted and that was to be the champs in our area." Although a reader might assume that these feelings are, in a very general sense, true, the writer's treatment is superficial and almost presumptuous. Common sense may tell us that any player on a team would want to be "champs," but the writer did not offer any supporting evidence that the players actually felt this way. Another writer also tried to present the feelings of others: "When we won the game, the newspaper reporters were shocked." However, like the previous writer, he provided no details or explanations to convince the reader of the accuracy of his statement.

A third writer who produced an essay categorized as

intensification wrote: "The side where Wilson was on was going crazy cheering for the home team. At the same time the people on the Deep Creek side had nothing to cheer about. It made us players on the team feel as if we were letting our family, friends, cousins, . . . down. They were just sitting there." The lack of success at presenting feelings or reactions of significant others centered on the superficiality of the attempt, not that the feelings or reactions probably did not exist. This superficial treatment is partly due to the difficulty of writing on group-phenomenon events.

To portray a group event, some of the basic writers attempted to include dialogue, usually unsuccessfully. One writer wrote: "I asked my coach if he felt as good as I did. He replied yes I do. I went on the explain to him about why it meant so much to me." The phrase "felt as good as I did" is ambiguous. A reader could easily question it. Do, in fact, the athlete and the coach feel good for the same reasons; are their degrees of feeling good equal? The lack of correct punctuation for dialogue and the use of indirect quoting also affected the quality. Later, he wrote, "While I was talking with my coach he just looked at me and said just keep proving to everybody that they're wrong about our team this year."

Initiation. In initiation essays, the events chosen were those the writers personally and individually experienced, ones that often taught them lessons. Examples

included the death of a friend or family member, a lost love, or a personal injury. These events often entailed a loss of innocence. The impact of the event was on the writer; the focus of the paper was on his emotions and what was learned. Even though others may have shared the experience, the focus was not on them, what they learned, or how they contributed to the event.

Those writers whose essays were categorized as initiation wrote their own feelings and reactions to an event. In contrast to those who wrote intensification-type essays, their treatment of the event tended to be more convincing and to have more depth. One writer wrote the following about a physical injury she had experienced: "At first I was feeling sorry for myself because this injury messed up for life my chance to do a lot of things. For example, I would not be able to play basketball on a more competitive level because of the fear and the impact of the damage done to the knee . . . . I felt cheated in some way, because I would for the rest of my life be subjected to pain when weather conditions are bad and when I stand on it for long periods of time." Because she is concerned with just her own feelings, the passage rings true partly because she gives reasons for her feelings. The depth of thought is greater than that by those writers who tried to recount feelings and reactions of others.

Another pervasive feature in essays of initiation was stating a moral. The above writer, in contemplating on the

consequences of her injury, concluded her essay with the following moral statement: "For a while, I was rebellious and always asking God why he did this to me. Always in the back of my mind, I kept hearing you,[the audience of the essay,] say don't question God because he has a reason for the serious injury . . . . [Later] I went into the hospital for surgery . . . [and] . . . one day the nurse's aids brought in this girl much younger than me who had been seriously burned. This girl not knowingly helped me to realize that my injury was not the worse one in the world . . . . I hope God's reason for the injury is good; however, all of God's reasons are perfect." Although a reader might question her moralizing in a general sense, her acceptance of the injury as an extension of God is believable. Typical in essays of initiation, the writer had withstood some serious event and had learned something for it.

The initiation essays were of better quality and had more credibility partly because the writers provided specifics. The writers were able to provide more credible supporting evidence because they did not have to take into account the feelings of others and because they could allot more time and essay space to writing about their own individual feelings and reactions.

Implications

At times topics for personal narrative essays may be too general and may result in some writers choosing an intensification topic-type and others choosing an initiation topic-type. Based on the results in this study, it is more difficult for basic writers to write on intensification topic-types. For assignments designed specifically to assess writing skills--and not other factors, such as specific knowledge or certain modes--writing instructors need to design topics to eliminate this topic-type factor. It may simply require a few additional words in the topic. "Give a chronological account of an emotional event that had an impact on you. Do not include the emotions of the other people in the event." Or, "Give a chronological account of an emotional event that had an impact on you and others. Be sure to include the emotions of yourself and the other people in the event." On the other hand, the additional words may not solve this problem; instructors may also need to provide instruction on the differences between the two topic-types of intensification and initiation and how to limit the treatment of a general topic to one of the two topic-types.

Because there exists a potential dichotomy in topic-type in some assignments and one appears to be easier, via quality scores, to write on than the other, writing teachers should also provide instruction on the skills needed to deal with the two topic types, particularly with those essays that

focus on group-phenomenon events. This type of instruction should give writers additional opportunities to decenter (Kroll, 1978), or take audience into account. Such instruction would have the writers engage in a more difficult writing task that requires them to present the content in a way so that the reader's reading and understanding of the essay is facilitated. Writing instructors often spend much instructional time on writing for different purposes, in different modes, and for different audiences. They also need to focus attention to topic-type and to anticipate problems students might encounter in making their choices.

A final implication centers on research. Because there were statistically significant mean differences in quality and words per clause between essays by basic writers categorized as intensification and those categorized as initiation, an analysis of the essays by honors writers needs to be conducted. If similar differences exist among honors writers, the points of this study have further implications. Furthermore, because this study is a re-analysis of data from another study, an additional study needs to be conducted in which some topics are designed to lead some writers to intensification topic-types or essays and other topics lead writers to initiation topic-types or essays. This study indicates that such a dichotomy exists, at least for some topics. A more controlled study may produce contrary results or perhaps even stronger evidence in support of the findings of this study.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses) of Holistic Quality Scores and Words Per Clause for Topic Type (Intensification or Initiation)

Dependent Measure	Topic Type: Intensification	Topic Type: Initiation
	n = 10	n = 33
Quality*	2.70 (1.06)	3.67 (1.02)
Words Per Clause**	9.74 (2.44)	8.60 (1.44)

*$F(1.41) = 6.771$, $MSe = 1.059$, $p = .012$

**$F(1.41) = 3.427$, $MSe = 2.926$, $p = .06$

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